

Department of Health and Senior Services
Remarks for Acting Commissioner Mary O'Dowd
Senate Judiciary Testimony – State House Annex
Thursday, April 28, 2011

Good morning Chairman Scutari, Vice Chairman Girgenti and distinguished members of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

I am honored to appear before you today.

I want to thank Governor Christie for nominating me to be the Commissioner of Health and Senior Services. I am humbled that he has placed his trust in me to protect the public's health, promote healthy communities and continue to improve the quality of health care in our great State.

In my three years at the Department, I have served under the leadership of two commissioners and I have seen the difference that a strong public health agency can make to the residents of New Jersey.

I would like to take a moment to introduce my family who are here today. My husband, Kevin O'Dowd, my mother, Maureen Marchetta, my father, Anthony Marchetta, my sister-in-law Debbie Campbell and her husband Rob and their three children Kyle, Robbie and Michael.

I was born and raised in New Jersey as the oldest of six children and the first grandchild for both sets of grandparents. I share this with you today because it is important to know that I am primarily a product of my family - which for me is a very large group of people with very different life experiences. My mother's parents were trained as a surgeon and a nurse – both who practiced in New Jersey. My father's parents were immigrants from Sicily – who arrived in New Jersey with limited formal education but provided for themselves by managing a small business. My foundation and core values, imparted by both families, include a strong sense of independence, an appreciation for the value of education, and the importance of personal integrity.

These are the principles that have guided me throughout my life and career. And they are the foundation that drove me to pursue an education and career in health care and public service.

I earned an undergraduate degree in biology from Douglass College, Rutgers University, and a Masters in Public Health in Health Services Management from Columbia University.

While at Rutgers, I decided on a career in public health because of the challenges involved in improving the health of our communities and the positive impact this work

can have on people's lives. I worked on healthcare policy in the Assembly Majority Office and subsequently representing the New Jersey Hospital Association.

After completing my graduate education, I was accepted to a fellowship program at NYU Medical Center in hospital finance. I continued working at NYU in revenue-cycle operations for the Emergency Department as a member of the leadership team. Many of our goals were achieved through collaboration with the clinical staff. Together we were successful in focusing on efforts to improve patient satisfaction and implementing new technology for patient tracking and registration.

I joined the Department in January 2008 as Chief of Staff to then Commissioner Heather Howard. My primary responsibility was to manage overall Department operations. During that time, I recognized--as I have throughout my career--that any effort to implement change or manage crisis requires a coordinated approach with effective communication.

For example, as Chief of Staff, I coordinated the State's response to the emergence of a novel flu virus, which required collaboration with federal, State, county and local officials, schools, health care providers and other partners. Working closely with the Department's physician leaders and local public health officials, we were able to control the spread of H1N1 and achieve a successful vaccination program across the State.

Another challenge the Department faced was stabilizing the state's hospital system. Working with the legislature and the Commissioner, I assisted in the implementation of an early warning system to monitor hospitals' financial health. These efforts were continued during the tenure of Commissioner Alaigh, when I served as Deputy Commissioner, responsible for the areas of Healthcare Financing, Licensing and Senior Services. In the last two budgets, the Christie Administration significantly increased its financial support to hospitals through the Department's Charity Care program while implementing reforms to make the program more transparent and predictable. These reforms are bringing increased stability in the hospital system and promoting a culture of strategic planning.

In the area of Senior Services our guiding principle has been - and will continue to be - decreasing institutionalization by increasing access to home and community based services—also known as "rebalancing." With your support, the Department has increased funding to grow our home and community based services, which provide autonomy and choice for seniors.

We also found ways for the Department to work smarter. One example is the Department's use of our pharmaceutical assistance program to increase awareness of the State's Nutrition Assistance Program. We believe there are thousands of low-income seniors who could be eligible for food assistance, but may not be aware of it. Our Department is working to ensure appropriate services and programs reach those most in need by using PAAD data to streamline the application process. This coordinated effort provides an efficient use of agency resources, while simplifying the process for seniors.

The ever changing environment of health care often dictates what issues confront the Health Commissioner--from working with hospitals in distress to managing an outbreak of pandemic flu. However, as Commissioner you also have the opportunity to choose issues where you can make a difference. If I am confirmed, I will focus my attention in three areas:

- First, promoting healthy people and healthy communities.
- Second, partnering with our provider community to improve end-of-life care by empowering patients and their families.
- And finally enhancing the basic internal operations of the Department and supporting initiatives to "work smarter."

From my experience, I know the impact the agency can have as a reliable source of health information and education. I believe our Department has an opportunity to increase the accessibility and transparency of health data to empower people to make informed choices and help providers improve quality of care. Through promoting access to health information, we can have a dramatic impact on the quality of life for residents and the care they receive.

Part of ensuring quality care to residents is educating them about end-of-life decisions. I know that caring for a loved one in the final stages of life is a painful experience for the entire family, but it is especially difficult when medical decisions need to be made without knowing the wishes of that person. We need to do more to educate, promote discussion, and advance individual decision making to help families work through these complex issues and ensure that end-of-life care is provided in the most appropriate manner. I hope to build upon the work already done by stakeholders and constituency groups involved in this issue to create meaningful change.

My time at the agency has provided me with an opportunity to understand the department's core functions. By focusing on the Department's basic operations we will: enhance our efficiency and effectiveness; ensure our services are readily available for our constituents and; improve our customer service to the regulated community.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing today and for your consideration of my nomination. I look forward to working with you on the Department's initiatives and I am pleased to answer any questions.